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Book Reviews-The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder

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Book Reviews

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The Professor and the Madman has all the earmarks of a rousing good tale: depravity, secrecy, madness, self-mutilation, murder, and remarkable coincidence, tempered by the inspiring and uplifting elements of redemption, good works, and the pursuit of a unique intellectual achievement: the creation of the first complete and etymological dictionary in English. Another of the great appeals of *The Professor and the Madman* is that the tale told could not have taken place today. It is firmly rooted in Victorian England. We already have the **OED**, of course, but more importantly, in our age of instant global communication and intense media frenzy, it would not be possible for a paranoid schizophrenic in an asylum to act as a key contributor to any literary enterprise without his identity and history becoming known. So part of the romance of this book is that it allows us access to another time, a simpler time, when secrets could be held and therefore great stories—great mysteries—could be left to unfold quietly over time. Given our recent political history in the US, this kind of story has a particular appeal.

Winchester, who is a veteran nonfiction writer with books on Korea and the Pacific, as well as other topics, has also written extensively for *National Geographic*, the *Smithsonian*, and other magazines and newspapers. He has a sense of narrative pull and uses it effectively. The book's preface offers a moment of great drama taken from near the end of the tale that is to be told, as the distinguished **Dr. James Murray**, creator of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, finally meets his staunch ally in tracking down quotations for use in the dictionary's definitions: **Dr. William Chester Minor**. Dr. Murray finds to his utter dismay that Minor is not a gentleman farmer as he had imagined, but a patient at the **Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum**.

As it happens, this particular story, Winchester tells us much later, is apocryphal. Dr. Murray learned of his contributor's situation in a slightly less staged and dramatic way. Nevertheless, the true tale is equal to this romantic denouement, and is, as Winchester promises, a story that is "strange, tragic, yet spiritually uplifting." Winchester launches chapter one with another moment of high drama, when Minor murders an innocent man in the street, thus setting in motion his own internment in an asylum and making possible his extensive and lengthy commitment to the work on the **OED**.

One of Winchester's successes in this book is his portrayal of Dr. Minor, a man raised in privilege (he graduated from Yale and attended medical school), who ultimately descends into madness and tragically takes another man's life. Winchester traces Minor's loss of connection with reality to his work in the army during the American Civil War. The best sense Winchester can make of the records that exist is that Minor became unhinged through enforced participation in the brutal punishments afforded to Union deserters. As the doctor, it was his responsibility to brand the face of an Irish mercenary soldier with a "D" for deserter. He was never the same again after carrying out this act, according to the best information Winchester has unearthed. His time in the army was coincident with, and seemed to cause, a slow but steady slide into wanton acts, obsessions (especially nocturnal, sexual ones), and paranoia that would culminate in the murder of a man he thought had plagued him in his sleep, but was in fact just an innocent father of seven heading to work.

Minor was locked away at Broadmoor for most of his life, but his time there was seemingly less terrible than may be imagined, and may surprise those accustomed to picturing nineteenth-century insane asylums as well worthy of the name acquired in that era: 'bedlam'. Minor, an aristocrat with a lifetime pension from the American army (from which he was discharged when his mental problems rendered him unable to perform his duties) was given two rooms with a view of farmland. One he filled with books, and it became the study from which he performed his work for the great dictionary.

His internment came at an opportune time for a would-be linguist and devoted reader. Dr. Murray had just resuscitated a project long considered but never fully realized: the creation of the first complete dictionary of the English language, including word histories. (It is breathtaking to consider just how recent the phenomenon of a dictionary as we know it today—an nonprescriptive alphabetical list of all the words in a language, defined and provided with pronunciation keys—is. Winchester offers a very helpful, readable, and brief history of dictionaries and dictionary-making as part of the background for his main story.) Murray's idea for making the project manageable was to enlist scholars from far and wide to read, read, and read some more, sending "catchwords" and quotations showing where and how the words had been used to Murray's office in England. Even with **Oxford University Press** funding the project, many such volunteers were needed if there was any chance of completing such a monumental task. One of Murray's requests for participants made its way to Minor at Broadmoor, probably through the intermediary of the wife of the man Minor had shot, who was—in another strange twist to this tale—a regular visitor to Minor's rooms and who regularly brought him books she'd purchased from antiquarian dealers in London.

From the time Minor began indexing his extensive collection of books, with a strong emphasis on 16th and 17th century literature, he was an unusual and primary contributor. He stayed abreast of the publication cycle and always worked on words that were currently being set into definitions in Murray's office. His specialty was coming up with apt quotations from various literary periods to show the development of a given word's use. Murray commented in the late 1890's that "so enormous have been Dr. Minor's contributions during the past 17 or 18 years, that we could easily illustrate the last 4 centuries from his quotations alone." By the time Minor's mental and physical health forced his retirement from dictionary duties, he had contributed more significantly to the dictionary than any other individual with the exception, oddly enough, of another mentally ill doctor, **Dr. Fitzedward Hall**. Hall's contributions were singled out, along with Minor's, as the most significant to the dictionary. In a string of coincidences, Hall, like Minor, was an American, had been a soldier, and had also become mentally ill in early adulthood, spending his later years in England.

Minor's life ends badly, with a gruesome act of self-mutilation that shall go undescribed here, followed by increased physical and mental decline. Finally given permission to leave England, his brother took him by ship to the United States, where he was cared for in another institution until his death in 1920 at age 85. If Minor's end is sad, so is the outcome of the book, in some respects, for not only is Minor claimed by frailty, dementia,

TestDriving CD-ROMs — Reviews of CD-ROM products

Twayne's United States Authors on CD-ROM, and *Learn Italian Now!*

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Learn Italian Now!

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Learn Italian Now! Version 6.0 is an activity-based language program that allows users to learn a new language by interacting with authentic native material. It follows an immersion approach to learning a foreign language that differs from most other programs. As not everyone learns the same way, students have the flexibility to jump right into the language or to follow a step-by-step approach if they prefer more structured lessons.

Students can select to begin with either of four titles: a cultural title (Guide to three Italian cities), a travel title (Around Italy with Gabriella and Piero), most common words, and survival phrases. These titles form the core of the work and have games, conversation practice, and Listen & Speak activities associated with them to supplement and reinforce the lessons and to build reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

After selecting a title, the student sees a screen that seems very busy, with eight windows open and laid out across the screen. However, one can minimize six of these windows, as desired, to get more working space. The main window appears on the left, under the bar indicating the open title. This contains the text of the dialog in Italian. The sentence or segment appears in blue and the word under the cursor is red. The media window appears to the right. Students can also opt to close this window to enlarge the text area, if so desired.

Both the text and media windows have two sets of controls: one to play the dialog or the video in its entirety and another to play it segment by segment. Playing the dialog in its entirety lets the student see the whole lesson; but it will be too fast and overwhelming for the beginning student. That's where the second set of controls prove valuable. With these, the student can slow the dialog to examine sentences word-by-word or in segments. The translation of the segment appears in the window beneath the text There are other windows for word meaning, root word, and phrase meaning.

As the student moves the cursor over the words and phrases, the text color changes and the meaning appears in the appropriate windows. Also, grammatical notes appear in the window in the lower right explaining the grammatical rules that apply to the particular word or phrase. All of these elements operate in sync with the text and video.

Another window appears just above the grammatical notes and below the media window. This is for recording personal notes about the grammar or other elements of the lesson or for adding or removing vocabulary words that need more attention. As students get more familiar with the language and need less prompting and assistance, they can close any unneeded windows except for the main text and notes/vocabulary windows.

The supplementary games consist of fill-in-the-blanks and unscrambling (arranging the words in proper order) activities, vocabulous (fill-in-the-blanks vocabulary builder), and crossword puzzles. For these last two, students can select a part of speech to focus on. Most

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and decrepitude, but Murray dies before seeing the end of his great project. It is Winchester's achievement that we do feel deeply for Murray, for Minor, and for Minor's victim. Winchester never minimizes the evil Minor did in killing an innocent person—and in fact dedicates his book to that long-lost man, **George Merrett**. Yet he shows us all the good that was in Dr. Minor, and tries to provide a modern-day context for what ailed him—what we would now call paranoid schizophrenia. Minor's story, in Winchester's hands, is an alchemy in which tragedy yields inspirational accomplishment. As Winchester comments: "One must feel a strange sense of gratitude, then, that [Minor's] treatment was never good enough to divert him from his task. The agonies he must have suffered in those terrible asylum nights have granted to us all a benefit for all time. He was mad, and for that, we have reason to be glad. A truly savage irony, on which it is discomfiting to dwell."

Throughout, it is impossible not to feel the great social, historical and intellectual significance—and beauty—of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Winchester manages to convey a sense of the scale, scope, and immensity of a project whose success was not at all foreordained, but whose unique achievement has made it seem so inevitable, so much a part of our landscape that it is inconceivable that it might not have come to being. And yet it could have not, without the stoic dedication and undying commitment of Murray and Minor and others like them. Before reading *The Professor and The Madman*, this year's planned launch of the Web version of the OED (see http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/98/11/circuits/articles/05oedd.html for details), seemed natural, inevitable. Now, after reading the book, it seems a kind of miracle. In the space of a little over one hundred years the English-speaking world will have gone from having no complete dictionary to having its first such dictionary offered up for global consumption in streams of little zeros and ones. I won't open the pages of the **OED**—or flip around its Website—without feeling the deep history and significance of this great work.